

**Remarks at a Memorial Service for Former Supreme Court Associate Justice
Sandra Day O'Connor**
December 19, 2023

To the O'Connor family, my wife Jill and I send our love on behalf of a truly grateful Nation for her service. I'm humbled to be asked to speak today.

To the members of the clergy, the Chief Justice, Justices of the Supreme Court past and present, members of the bench and bar, Members of the Congress, distinguished guests, and fellow Americans. More than 40 years ago, on a Wednesday in September 1981, the Senate Judiciary Committee came to order.

I was the ranking member of that Committee, and the day's business was momentous: the nomination of Sandra Day O'Connor to become the first woman in American History to serve as a Supreme Court Justice on the United States Supreme Court.

Announcing her nomination earlier that summer, President Reagan described her as, and I quote, "a person for all seasons." And it was a person for all seasons whom we saw in that hearing and the Americans and the world would see through her extraordinary service as a Justice and, I might add, as a citizen.

Gracious and wise, civil and principled, Sandra Day O'Connor, a daughter of the American West, was a pioneer in her own right, breaking down the barriers in legal and political worlds and the Nation's consciousness.

To her, the Supreme Court was bedrock, the bedrock of America. It was a vital—a vital—line of defense for the values and the vision of our Republic, devoted not to the pursuit of power for power's sake, but to make real the promise of America: the American promise that holds that we're all created equal and deserve to be treated equally throughout our lives.

The High Court, she said in her opening statement, and I quote, "is the body to which all Americans look for the ultimate protection of their rights. It is the United States Supreme Court that we all turn when we seek that which we want most from our Government: equal justice under law." End of quote.

Equal justice under law is the noble—the noblest aspiration of humankind and the aspiration of Sandra Day O'Connor, one that she pursued her whole life. The last Justice to have held elected office, she was especially conscious of the law's real impact on people's lives.

One need not agree with all her decisions in order to recognize that her principles were deeply held and of the highest order and that her desire for civility was genuine. And her trust in the capacity of human institutions to make life better is what this world—was abiding.

And how she embodied such attributes under such pressure and scrutiny helped empower generations of women in every part of American life, including the Court itself, helping to open doors, secure freedoms, and prove that a woman can not only do anything a man can do but, many times, do it a hell of a lot—a heck of a lot better. *[Laughter]* Excuse my language, Father.

Beyond the bench, Justice O'Connor valued the civic life of the Nation: in our schools and our community centers, in families and in our friendships. Yes, America is the land of rugged individualists, adventurers, and entrepreneurs. But she knew no person is an island.

In the fabric of our Nation, we're all inextricably linked. And for the America to thrive, America must see themselves not as enemies but as partners in the great work of deciding our

collective destiny. That's the essence of our national experience, the sacred cause of democracy she devoted her life to, one that we must continue.

I'll close with how she closed her opening statement on that September day 42 years ago. She spoke about the power of family, family being the hope of the world, the strength of community, the relationship between ourselves and generations who follow.

To her sons—Scott, Brian, and Jay—how she admired your intellect and, you may recall, at that hearing, your sense of adventure. [*Laughter*] We all saw on that day and all those years after how much she loved your dad, a brilliant lawyer who always, always supported her.

To the entire family, including the grandchildren, I know how hard all these years have been to watch a disease that robbed them both and all of you of so very much.

But I hope—I hope—you hold on to what is never truly lost: the love both of them had for you and the love you had for them, a love they shared so freely and a love you returned with equal devotion. What a gift. What a gift.

And I hope you find comfort in another profound consequence of her service: the countless families that she helped by speaking so openly about your family's experiences. It matters.

In that opening statement, on that day in September, she mentioned how your parents got married in December. Here we gather today, a day before it would have been their 71st [70th; White House correction] wedding anniversary.

I know the anniversaries and the birthdays, the moments big and small, will be hard without them. But as a saying goes, memory is the power to gather roses in winter.

I hope you find the strength in knowing that your mom and dad are together again this December, gathering roses in winter once again as great Americans, both great Americans for all seasons.

May God bless Sandra Day O'Connor, an American pioneer.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:36 a.m. at the Washington National Cathedral. In his remarks, he referred to Chief Justice of the United States John G. Roberts, Jr., and former Associate Justice Anthony M. Kennedy; Randolph Marshall Hollerith, dean, Washington National Cathedral; and Courtney, Adam, Keely, Weston, Dylan, and Luke O'Connor, grandchildren of former Associate Justice O'Connor.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Former Supreme Court Associate Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, memorial service.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Alito, Samuel A., Jr.; Barrett, Amy Coney; Biden, Jill T.; Gorsuch, Neil M.; Hollerith, Randolph Marshall; Jackson, Ketanji Brown; Kagan, Elena; Kavanaugh, Brett M.; Kennedy, Anthony M.; O'Connor, Adam; O'Connor, Brian; O'Connor, Courtney; O'Connor, Dylan; O'Connor, Jay; O'Connor, Keely; O'Connor, Luke; O'Connor, Sandra Day; O'Connor, Scott; O'Connor, Weston; Roberts, John G., Jr.; Sotomayor, Sonia; Thomas, Clarence.

Subjects: Deaths, former Supreme Court Associate Justice Sandra Day O'Connor; Supreme Court Associate Justices; Supreme Court Chief Justice; Women's rights and gender equality.

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